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Easing teens' 'collective trauma' during pandemic

Through the nonprofit City Year, recent college grads help students navigate the fear and isolation.



ALEJANDRINA Arizmendi-Ramirez's intervention at John Liechty Middle School typifies the work of 225 young adults who are embedded in 26 schools throughout Los Angeles County as part of the nonprofit City Year. (Gina Ferazzi Los Angeles Times)

BY JULIA BARAJAS

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Sometimes it's karaoke. Sometimes it's multiplayer games like skribbl or Among Us. Whatever it is, middle school student Tiggerina Virgen never skips her after-school program — even though it means more time on Zoom.

During one meeting, Alejandrina Arizmendi-Ramirez, a recent college graduate who runs the sessions, found out that Tiggerina had an F in science.

She quickly mobilized support for Tiggerina, making sure she submitted missing work and stayed on track. Tiggerina's grade rose to a D. Then a C.

"I was, like, I'm so proud of you!" Arizmendi-Ramirez said. "I asked her: 'So, what helped you change that grade? What are you planning to do next?'"

Arizmendi-Ramirez's intervention at John Liechty Middle School typifies the work of 225 young adults who are embedded in 26 schools throughout Los Angeles County, including Boyle Heights, Inglewood, Pico Union and Watts.

They're part of [City Year](#), a nonprofit tied to AmeriCorps. Usually corps members serve as mentors and tutors to help students reach graduation. But during the pandemic, they have become a social lifeline for students, many of whom are faltering as they grapple with a sense of despair after months away from their friends.

Education experts said the personal, on-the-ground work City Year members provide is an example of the type of extended learning support that is needed to address the growing mental health crisis among students as school closures drag into the 10th month.

Recent data and studies signal the increasing toll the pandemic is taking on students. Since last spring, the proportion of mental-health-related emergency room visits has increased 31% for children 12 to 17 years old, [data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show](#); a [survey of 3,300 high school students](#) described a sense of "collective trauma" as nearly a third said they are more often feeling unhappy or depressed.

Arizmendi-Ramirez, a UC Santa Cruz graduate and the first in her family to go to college, knows firsthand why students need support.

"Growing up, I was not a student to reach out for help," she said. "It wasn't until I was trying to figure out what to do after high school that I realized I couldn't do it alone."

At John Liechty Middle School, students told her that time to socialize is most important to them during the after-school sessions.

"Genuine human interactions are what really matter now," said Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, an assistant professor of education, psychology and neuroscience at USC whose [research](#) examines the relationship between emotions and deeper levels of learning.

The pandemic has introduced a host of burdens to students' lives. Concerns over relatives falling ill, the fear of getting sick or infecting loved ones, even dying, she said, are "consuming kids' thinking because they're so emotionally salient." Also, many families are grappling with housing and food insecurity, making it difficult for students to focus on academics.

Since April, the Los Angeles school district's Student and Family Wellness Hotline has received more than 11,000 calls, mostly from caretakers seeking mental health support for

their children or seeking assistance with basic needs.

Tyrone Howard, a professor at UCLA's School of Education and Information Studies, urges school leaders to develop strategic plans to address students' mental health needs.

"There are real out-of-school factors that impact students' ability to do well in school," Howard said. When students finally get back in the classroom, he added, educators will have to address the social emotional well-being of students. "We cannot just jump back into learning as usual when kids have endured so much."

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Corps members, who typically earn a biweekly \$735 stipend in Los Angeles, said the lack of in-person contact is the biggest obstacle to cultivating meaningful relationships with students. In the past, the kids could readily approach them on campus. They could also sit beside struggling students in class and pull them aside for a chat.

Andrea Labb is a University of Massachusetts at Amherst graduate and corps member who works with students at Jefferson High School in South Los Angeles. Last year, she supported a student who suffered from acute anxiety.

"When she got overwhelmed, I would take her out, and we'd just walk around campus for five or 10 minutes," Labb said. "Sometimes she would talk about what was going on. Sometimes we'd talk about Harry Potter. Sometimes we just walked in silence." Afterward, they would return to class and the student would reengage.

Such coping strategies are currently impossible. For Labb and her colleagues, this meant figuring out new ways to reinvent past experiences. To attain a semblance of normality, corps members wear their yellow jackets when they're online with students. Without morning greetings, which involved blasting music and welcoming students on campus, corps members exploit Zoom's chat feature.

"We greet them all every morning," Labb said. "We send them a message just asking, 'How are you?' or 'How was your weekend?' It's a small way of adding humanity to all this technology."

Corps members then take note of the students' responses. If any are routinely silent or say they're not feeling great, they follow up.

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In addition to providing homework help and space for interaction, some corps members help monitor students' mental health — a task that's become more urgent and difficult with distance learning.

Faced with the pandemic maelstrom, Principal Adalberto Vega and staff at John Liechty Middle School have made mental health a constant theme at virtual meetings with parents, in which administrators teach them how to spot signs of stress in their children.

The administrators were also intentional about City Year's role in students' well-being. When developing the after-school program, said Vice Principal Eleanor Murray, "the plan of action was to reach a clear understanding of how the social emotional support would take place, because the rapport has to be developed for students to feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feelings."

When students share personal challenges, corps members listen closely. Then, if necessary, they connect them with counselors or administrators who can provide them with additional support.

"To be the person that students turn to if they need to talk is a privilege," Labb said. "It's something I take very seriously."

Strengthening students' support network amid the pandemic has proved fruitful. Back in August, Tiggerina's mother, Yesica Ayala, worried about her daughter's transition from elementary school to sixth grade at Liechty. Tiggerina has always been a bit shy. When schools closed in March, Ayala struggled to get her out of bed and ready for class.

But Tiggerina is navigating the school year with success. Her camera stays on when she's in class. She's making new friends and seeks help when she needs it. Science has become one of her favorite courses.

Ayala credits the change in her daughter to City Year, which gives her the opportunity to connect with friends or staff members before hunkering down for class. From her bedroom, Ayala often hears her daughter's laugh.